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CHAPTER 7. RAG (RESEARCH ADVISORY GROUP) PROGRAM

7.01 GENERAL

The Research Advisory Groups are composed of senior VA scientists who review initial investigator-initiated research proposals of newly recruited junior independent clinician-scientists or established investigators who are new to VA or who are transferring to a new VA medical center and who are not transferring their merit review program. This funding mechanism allows newly recruited clinician-investigators to promptly obtain "seed" money for initiation of a research program.

a. Before submission to VA Central Office, all RAG programs must first be evaluated by VA medical center R&D Committee and approved by Director of the medical center. The RAGs furnish the second level of peer review.

b. Funding requests are appropriate for consideration by RAGS, if they represent recruitment of doctoral level clinical staff who are independent investigators with research expertise who are essential to the patient care mission of VA medical center. **Investigators must have demonstrated evidence of research productivity.** Nonclinician Ph.D. investigators whose salaries are derived from the hospital care budget are eligible for RAG support, as well as veterinarians with a doctoral degree. Requests for research support will be considered when submitted before appointment to VA or up to 6 months after the date the investigator entered on duty at VA facility.

c. Investigators are eligible for VA Central Office Medical Research support only if they have established a significant role in VA medical center. A 5/8 VA-salaried position is accepted as evidence of a significant role. A determination of eligibility must be made by VA Central Office Medical Research Service Eligibility Committee for each investigator who receives less than 5/8 VA salary support. The Committee determines the eligibility of an investigator to receive research support on the basis of the justification which is provided by VA medical center. The request for eligibility may be made before, or in conjunction with, a RAG submission. (See M-3, pt. II, ch. 3.)

d. Investigators who have ongoing merit review funding and who transfer this support to another medical center may not apply for RAG support.

e. In order to provide a prompt response, RAGS meet a minimum of four times per year to review requests, usually around the beginning or end of each quarter. The deadline for receipt of RAG proposals is February 1, May 1, August 1, or November 1.

f. Before RAG review, research which is proposed to use animals is reviewed by VA or non-VA laboratory animal specialists chosen for experience, knowledge, and research in laboratory animal science and medicine. Recommendations from these veterinarians are considered by the RAG and are then forwarded to VA medical center with the review results.

g. There are four Research Advisory Groups, each composed of six or more VA biomedical or behavioral researchers. The members usually serve for 3 years. One RAG confines its reviews exclusively to research in Mental Health and Behavioral Sciences.

The other groups review all other research proposals and include individuals with expertise in fields of surgery, neurology, biochemistry, hematology, oncology, nephrology, immunology, infectious diseases, cardiology, pulmonary diseases, gastroenterology, endocrinology, and clinical pharmacology.

h. Each proposal is reviewed in depth for scientific merit by two members of the RAG and one or more ad hoc reviewers, including the Program Specialist in the field of the proposed study. Following RAG and VA Central Office Medical Research Service review, the critiques and VA Form 10-1313-10, Research Advisory Group Summary Statement (blue sheet), are returned to VA medical center for the principal investigator's information. All proposals receiving a fundable priority score will be fully funded provided that sufficient funds are available. Currently, proposals with a priority score of 30.0 and above are not funded. Distribution of funds will be effected at the beginning of the quarter which follows the RAG meeting, although written requests for deviation from this policy will be considered. RAG recommendations are not subject to the formal appeals process.

i. Funding in response to a RAG request may be provided to newly independent junior investigators for no longer than 2 calendar years. Established investigators may receive funding for only 1 year.

j. Investigators with RAG support may apply for a Career Development award. An investigator approved for Career Development funding, except the Associate Investigator, may not apply for RAG funding. Associate Investigators may apply for RAG support before expiration of their award, or within 6 months of completion of their training. If eligibility requirements are met, approved funding will be allocated at the completion of the award. If an investigator has RAG funding or if a RAG proposal and Career Development application obtain concurrent approvals with fundable priority scores, the investigator (except for Associate Investigators or Senior Medical Investigators) will receive RAG support as Career Development appointees normally receive Merit Review funding.

k. Each RAG submission must be presented in the acceptable format for Merit Review applications, including the use of VA Forms 10-1313-2-8, with each page numbered in sequence. The required information must be complete and comprehensive and provided in the order as described below. Applications will be considered incomplete and returned if they are illegible, fail to follow instructions, the material presented is insufficient to permit an adequate review, or the designated investigator has no previous research experience or training and no relevant publications.

1. There must be positive written assurance that the investigator's proposed research program has been considered and approved by the Research and Development Committee and, whenever necessary, by its appropriate subcommittees. This information must be forwarded at the time the RAG proposal is submitted for review.

m. Each application must be submitted unbound, in an original, plus 10 single-spaced copies duplicated back-to-back on 21.5 x 27.9 centimeter paper. The original must, however, be duplicated face only. Type the name of the investigator in the lower right portion of each page, and number each page consecutively. Requests must be sent through appropriate local channels to Director, Medical Research Service (151C). If a facility has multiple requests for submission simultaneously, each request must be submitted as a separate item with its own letter of transmittal.

n. A proposal that is disapproved or obtains an unfundable priority score may not usually be resubmitted; however, infrequently, the RAGs may invite the applicant to submit a revised proposal. When submitting the revised proposal, the investigator must include a letter with the proposal, no longer than three single-spaced pages, indicating how and where responses to the last review have been addressed. All invited resubmissions must be submitted in time for the next, or no later than the second, cycle of RAG review. A revised proposal which has a different title or different direction of research or does not contain a letter in response to the previous review will not be reviewed.

o. RAG proposals may not be transferred to another investigator or VA facility.

p. The Medical Research Service intends to provide timely and constructive responses to requests. Cooperation in providing explicit, complete and relevant information will assure objective review by the RAGS.

q. The appropriate Staff Assistant in Medical Research Service (151C) may be contacted for schedules of RAG meetings or for additional information.

7.02 DIRECTOR'S LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

This letter must be addressed to the Director, Medical Research Service (151C), signed by the medical center Director, and must address the following:

a. The role of the investigator in the clinical program of the medical center. Is the investigator to replace a previous staff member or to be an addition to the clinical staff?

b. Will the investigator be full-time or part-time and, if part-time, what portion of the salary, in eighths, will come from VA? How many hours per week will be available for research? What is the effective or proposed date of entrance on duty at VA?

c. What are the long-term plans for research support of the investigator? What is the plan for submission of an application for Merit Review and when will the application be forwarded to VA Central Office?

d. What research facilities are available for the investigator? How much space will be made available and where will it be located? What equipment and technical personnel are already available to be used or shared by the investigator?

e. Signature of the medical center Director, or designee.

7.03 INSTRUCTIONS FOR PREPARING RAG PROPOSALS

a. Submit Acknowledgment of Receipt of Component Research Program, VA Form 10-7956, or FL 22a, Business Reply Card.

b. Submit Research Advisory Group Summary Statement, VA Form 10-1313-10 (completed blocks 3-17), including specified Program Area and specialty area, and budget requested for each year. VA Form 10-1313-10 may be obtained by following the requisitioning instructions in the most recent catalog, VA LOG 1, Standardized Forms and Form Letters.

c. Include a letter of transmittal addressed to the Director, Medical Research Service (151C) and signed by the facility Director, or designee.

d. Include an addendum to the letter of transmittal on a separate page with A year-by-year summary of the applicant's research experience, accomplishments, and future plans.

e. Submit Research and Development Committee approval and detailed documentation of scientific merit of the proposal.

f. Submit letter(s) of support from collaborators.

g. Submit VA Forms 10-1313-2-8. The RAG will consider utility Min'lmd! and essential costs for the initiation of the research. Requests for expensive equipment will seldom be granted to newly independent investigators. Arrangements should be made for sharing such items with other investigators at the facility.

h. Describe the research proposed. While the description must always be as extensive as that required for Merit Review, this description must be complete enough to permit review of the scientific and technical merit of the proposal. The narrative of each proposal must be prepared with 10.5 to 12 point type or its equivalent and must be limited to 1.5 single-spaced pages.

i. Investigations involving human subjects will not be reviewed until they have been approved by VA medical center or affiliated university Subcommittee on Human Studies. A completed and current Report of Subcommittee on Human Studies, VA Form 10-1223, dated no earlier than 1 year before receipt date for this application, must be submitted with the application and must be accompanied by VA Form 10-1086 that will be presented to each subject or legally responsible representative prior to the subject's participation in the study.

j. Applications involving the use of animals will not be reviewed unless they contain and conform to a completed check list as outlined in M-3, part 1, chapter 12. This information containing the approval of the Subcommittee on Animal Studies, dated no earlier than 1 year before the receipt date for the application, must be submitted with the application.

k. Proposals containing procedures that constitute a potential biohazard will not be reviewed unless accompanied by a current explanation of safety precautions to be taken. A statement from the local VA or university Biohazard Subcommittee on Safety must be submitted with the proposal.

l. Six copies only of up to five appropriate selected papers may be submitted, but they must be separate from the copies of the proposal. Publications must not be placed in an appendix with each of the copies of the proposal.

m. Investigators submitting RAG applications are encouraged to suggest the names of two or more scientists they believe are qualified to review their proposal. This is especially useful when the research does not fall within the area of expertise of any of the RAGS. The list of potential reviewers' names must also include their academic affiliations, complete addresses, and telephone numbers. The names of extramural scientists who reviewed the proposal for VA medical center R&D Committee should also be included.

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